



### Workers who have disabilities exceed expectations

Walgreens “got serious” about hiring people who have disabilities “about five or six years ago,” according to Randy Lewis, senior vice president of distribution and logistics for Walgreens Co., who spoke near Washington, D.C., Sept. 17, 2009, as part of the US Business Leadership Network (USBLN) 2009 Annual Conference. Walgreens was making plans to build new distribution centers at the time and decided to build one that would enable those with physical and cognitive disabilities to work.

The center, which opened in 2007, has reached its goal, employing individuals with autism, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injuries and Down syndrome. These employees work side by side with nondisabled co-workers for the same pay and are subject to the same performance standards.

“What surprised us was the culture that this created,” Lewis said. “It changed us. There’s a sense of purpose, a sense of being, a sense of teamwork.”

In the past, when Lewis met with groups of employees he would receive questions such as “when will this equipment work properly?” and “when can we get Saturday off?” But when he meets with Anderson employees he is asked things like “how are we doing?” and “what can we do to help?”

Lewis said that little changes put in place by creative supervisors have corrected minor performance issues. For example, an individual with obsessive-compulsive disorder was directed to focus her attention on the number of boxes she handled as opposed to how neatly she opened each box. An employee’s personal space issues were resolved with brightly colored tape and a sign that marked his work area clearly.

The center has fewer accidents, lower insurance costs, lower turnover and no labor/management issues. “People say it’s going to cost a lot [to employ people who have disabilities]. It’s not,” Lewis said.

Moreover, individuals who would be overlooked by other employers are among the most productive the center employs. A man with mental retardation is the most productive employee, he said, and the third most productive employee is a young man with autism who can’t complete a simple math problem, but whose productivity exceeds the standard by 50 percent. “The most productive center we have in our 100-year history is Anderson,” Lewis said.

Consequently, the company brought management from other centers to Anderson to learn. As a result, other centers—even those lacking automation—are beginning to adopt similar practices. The company has set a goal to employ 1,000 people who have disabilities (or 10 percent of its distribution center workforce) by 2010. As of Sept. 17, the company had 676.